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"Review of Irena R. Makaryk and Joseph G. Price (eds) Shakespeare in the Worlds of Communism and Socialism (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006) ISBN 0802090583 $85 440pp" by Gabriel Egan

Marxists are natural taxonomists, and to impose order on its disparate materials the editors of this book use four more or less chronological sections covering the Soviet period from 1917 to the second world war, the second world war to the 1990s, the satellite states and China, and lastly a section that puts Cuba in with a pair of essays reflecting upon critical practice. Most of the essays are histories of theatre practitioners using Shakespeare productions to critique the prevailing regimes. When Socialist Realism was declared the only permissible form in 1934, Shakespeare was simultaneously affirmed as a model writer, having previously been rather a fought-over figure whom some dismissed as merely a lackey of the English aristocracy and others praised as an early humanist progressive. Even once that question was settled (Shakespeare was officially progressive), instructions from Moscow were attenuated by the vast distances of the new empire and tempered by local traditions. Shakespeare was most often adapted in the peripheral theatres and productions could at once affirm and subvert the official line. The theatre's essential unrepeatability, compared to celluloid's unchangeability, worried the Communist Party, for it undermined control. Despite this, in the 1930s more theatre productions of Shakespeare were mounted in the USSR than in Great Britain and America combined.

As Arkady Ostrovsky points out (pp. 56-83), putting Shakespeare to ideological purposes did not necessarily make for bad theatre, especially if the greatest Russian stage talents such as Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vsevolod Meyerhold were involved. Perhaps surprisingly, "the Soviet culture of the 1930s saw itself as a direct heir of the Renaissance". But not all plays were equal. The 'warm' Mediterranean plays were preferred to the 'cold' northern ones, and tragedies of accident were preferred to conflicts of innate guiltiness. Hamlet and Macbeth were thus especially unsuited to the official optimism about the human spirit. Romeo and Juliet would be perfect if only (as was proposed for one production) the ending were changed to let the lovers survive. Whereas in the 1920s directors attempted to adjust the classics to the present situation, by the 1930s what mattered was faithfulness to the original. A director like Meyerhold stamping his identity on a production was suspect, and in Leningrad the director Sergei Radlov earned favour with the party by attacking Meyerhold's hubris.

For the Moscow State Jewish Theatre (GOSET) Les Kurbas prepared to direct Solomon Mikhoels as Lear in 1933, and they agreed that he learns to feel what the suffering masses feel. Kurbas was arrested before the opening, and as his replacement Radlov imposed an interpretation in which Lear's great mistake was to neglect the driving forces of history. To Mikhoels this seemed shallow didacticism but Radlov got his interpretation written into the programme: Lear "pitted himself against the objective principle of the development of society and the historically progressive unification of England". In performance, however, Mikhoels got his way and presented "a philosophical tragedy of mistaken thought", an attempt to abjure everything (crown and family ties) in an act of free will. Thus Lear flies into a rage at Cordelia not because he cannot tell the difference between sincerity and flattery, but because by not playing along with Lear's game, or experiment, of giving everything away for mere words she was imposing her free will on

the situation; in any other situation this father would have admired his daughter's independent spirit.

Laurence Senelick surveys Soviet responses to The Taming of the Shrew (pp. 84-103), which had become a staple of the nineteenth-century Russian stage. The aesthetic at the Second Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre of the 1920s was a proto-Brechtianism that highlighted the fact that the actors were playing roles, for which Shrew was especially suited because only the Sly induction is 'real': the rest of the play is avowedly a performance put on to entertain him. Petruccio's traditional macho whipcracking was omitted to make this a battle of minds not bodies. Early 1920s productions of Shrew could emphasize the carnival, the collective, the joy of actors free from directorial control. Under Socialist Realism the triumph of heroes breaking away from old ways became a force of social transformation, so long as the production made clear the state of the class war in the play. Shakespeare's comedic subject matter was thus amenable to the new doctrines, but Elizabethan performance practices were not: in place of its stylized conventions, realism was now demanded. In this new context, Shrew could be read as laying bear the hypocrisy and sexual bondage of conventional bourgeois marriage, which the emergent Soviet feminist movement was already challenging.

In telling this vast history, ironies abound. While left-wing Shakespearians in the West looked to radical theatrical forms and mocked liberal claims about Shakespeare's humanism and realism, in socialist countries--and especially in China, as Xiao Yang Zhang shows (pp. 270-282)--these liberal qualities were officially Shakespeare's chief virtues and experiments with form were mocked as bourgeois decadence. Hollywood learnt from Broadway the realistic acting practices of Stanislavsky (via the Actors' Studio and Lee Strasberg) just when the state-controlled Soviet and Chinese theatres were insisting on them too. In some ways, though, the official communist line was genuinely progressive. Although Shuhua Weng (pp. 283-302) dismisses it as an illusion, the Chinese Marxist critics who condemned the sexism in Shakespeare's writing do seem to have been ahead of the Western feminists.

Necessarily selective even at 450 pages, the essayists repeatedly apologize for having to condense the history of, say, Shakespeare in Latvia (pp. 38-55), or Hamlet on the East German stage (pp. 177-204). Inevitably, the collapse of 1989-91 looms over the collection. Robert Weimann (pp. 328-48) describes his input to a 1977 production of Hamlet in which the famous advice to the players was conveyed as an elitist prig lecturing to real actors about their craft. This challenged the valorizing of the classical script and the Stanislavskian methods which, in Weimann's diagnosis, were symptoms of the post-war East German theatre's desperation to forget its own experiments in form before the war. Once the Western post-structuralist critics (he names John Drakakis, Graham Holderness, Jean Howard and others) hit the East German Shakespeare conference circuit in the mid-1980s, everything started to change and these facts could be acknowledged.

The final essay is Sharon O'Dair's account of Marxist thinking in North American criticism since 1980 (pp. 349-73). O'Dair rejects the argument of Jean Howard and Scott Cutler Shershow (Marxist Shakespeares, 2001) that Marx's prediction of increasing proletarian immiseration as the bourgeoisie became fewer and richer failed to materialize only because organized labour wrested concessions from the bourgeoisie. O'Dair objects that organized labour is inherently anti-Marxist because workers identifying with others of their own trade (and even with their trade's bosses) cannot see

the big economic picture. Unions, moreover, have tended to be deeply sexist and racist, which is hardly compatible with emancipatory politics. O'Dair might have considered, if only to dismiss, the grim possibility that the predicted immiseration has occurred, but largely out of sight in the southern hemisphere.

(1200 words)